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ABSTRACT

To ensure that school systems are prepared for the future, their boards must provide for both internal and external conditions through careful assessment and planning processes. Strategic planning consists of setting long-term goals, determining the best means of attaining them, and relating the chosen course to operating plans. This type of planning is a complex process, susceptible to inefficiency and incompleteness. A formalized model, however, can contribute to successful planning by developing participants' understanding. Such a model can be constructed in nine steps, as follows: (1) analyzing existing conditions; (2) defining long-range, general objectives and short term, specific goals supporting these objectives; (3) analyzing the external environment; (4) assessing available resources; (5) synthesizing the first four steps to identify deficiencies in existing strategies; (6) exploring alternative strategies; (7) choosing a strategy; (8) developing contingency plans; and (9) translating the strategy into operating plans. The school board may be involved in this process in any of three ways. It may simply prescribe goals and objectives for the school system, or it may take a passive role, reviewing administration proposals. The most productive course, however, is for the board to work cooperatively with the administration. (MCG)

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Boards of Education and System-wide Strategic Planning

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To be certain that a school system is prepared for the future, school boards must have a sound understanding and appreciation of the internal and external environments that will affect the system and must be able to deal effectively with them through careful assessment and planning processes. Many school systems are using organized planning activities as a means of dealing with system-wide concerns. This has resulted in planning being recognized as an increasingly important activity that can help to ensure the attainment of a system's long-range goals and objectives.

The importance of planning within a school system is substantiated by the suggestion that the highest level of system-wide decision-makers, the school board, must be involved. Drucker (1974), states that somebody [the school board] has to make sure that the top management thinks through what the organization's business is and what it should be. Somebody has to make sure that objectives are being set and strategies are being developed. Somebody has to look critically at the planning of the organization.

Planning and, subsequently, the planning process, are not limited to any particular level of system-wide management. However, each level is concerned with different specific end results. The school board, typically, is concerned with the overall direction the system should pursue, while the superintendent's office is concerned with the direction of the system within the framework the school board provides. Additionally, other systemwide administrators, building administrators, and teachers are concerned with the continued success toward the attainment of system-wide goals and objectives. All of these concerns are important to any school district, for success at each level is essential for continued student development. However, the direction provided school administrators by the school board is of particular significance because of its unique pervasive imoact on management decisions.

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Before an understanding of the relationship between the school board and the strategic planning process can be reached, an understanding of strategic planning is essential.

Strategy Defined

Let's just examine the end result of strategic planning - strategy. Strategy has been defined by numerous authors during the past quarter century. Unfortunately, the definitions have not been consistent, nor have they been built upon previous definitions over the years. Consequently, no single definition has evolved which provides a greater depth of meaning and understanding.

In light of these observations, a generic definition of strategy as applied to the non-profit or profit enterprise can be developed:

> Strategy is a plan, which can occur at any level within the organization, that relates the internal environment of the organization with its external environment in a manner designed to achieve a specific end result over the long term.

Strategic Planning Defined

Strategic planning is defined as:

1. Performing the activities associated with determining the goals and the objectives to be attained over the long term;

2. Determining the best alternative for attaining these goals and objectives given the most appropriate match that can develop between the resources that are available (internal environment) and the external environment in which the goals and objectives are to be pursued, and;

3. Relating this alternative to operating plans.

Given this definition, the relationship between strategic planning and strategy becomes apparent. Strategic planning is the decision-making process that develops the plan which is the strategy. This process can be used at any level or within any function of the educational organization. Consequently, strategies can be present at any level or be associated with any function within the organization.

Strategy Formulation Process

The definitions of strategy and strategic planning imply that the process associated with these managerial activities is reasonably complex. In any complex situation without direction the individuals involved may, at the very least, be inefficient in carrying out the related tasks. At worst, they may never complete the tasks.

The use of a formalized approach to formulate strategy will provide a means by which an awareness and understanding of strategic planning concepts and precepts can be developed within the educational organization. This will help reduce the probability of failure due to improper implementation of the functions associated with the strategic planning process. The specific step-by-step approach of a formalized process will contribute to the success of the process, which might otherwise fail because of lack of management understanding and commitment.

Numerous elements have been proposed as constituents of the formalized strategic planning formulation process. These elements tend to be related to nine major activities. The activities and their typical order of occurrence are shown in the following table.

Strategic Planning Formulation Process

1. Situation Analysis
2. Objectives Determination
3. Environmental Analysis
4. Resource Analysis
5. Divergence Analysis
6. Strategy Alternatives Determination
7. Strategy Choice
8. Contingency Plans Determination
9. Implementation and Control

Situation Analysis

The initial step in the strategy formulation process is concerned with the present situation. Information and data that pertain to current conditions are gathered during this step. Without awareness of the present situation and the direction being taken, the ability to successfully complete the subsequent steps is questionable.

Objective Determination

There is a need to focus all planning activities of the school system in one direction. Clearly defined objectives serve this purpose (Kudla, 1976). Early definitions of the end results that are sought is important, for it provides a reference point throughout the process. Consequently, school board members can determine whether what is being done or what has been concluded should be accepted, rejected or modified. In addition, an awareness of the objectives is necessary to determine how and what resource trade-offs should take place.

The importance of the role of objective and goal determination is implied by the general agreement that decision making within the educational context should be guided by and be consistent with the overall objectives of the school system. If objectives and goals are so important, what are they and how are they related?

Objectives are general, philosophical statements that serve as long-range guidelines for the direction and the operation of the school system. In this sense an objective is an end result or end of action being aimed for, but because of its philosophical nature it must be continually studied for; as such it can provide direction to intermediate decisions and actions but cannot be achieved in an absolute sense (Granger, 1964). The general philosophical nature of an objective suggests that an objective ought to stand the test of time, is best expressed qualitatively, must be relevant to a wide range of circumstances without being vague, and is general in tone and expression yet unambiguous in meaning.

Goals are considered to be an element of an objective. They are a specific, quantitative end result that is to be attained within a specific time period. The implication of this definition is that objectives are related to strategic planning by providing broad long-range guidelines while goals, which are based on and derived from objectives, are related to operational planning by providing specific short-range ends to be achieved.

Environmental Analysis

The environmental analysis is concerned with acquiring information pertaining to the external environment. Great care must be taken when implementing this step. For it is this activity that can contribute, quite easily, to an overabundance of insignificant and irrelevant data. In addition,

once the data have been gathered, an appropriate method of analysis must be used or incorrect conclusions will result.

The occurence of these problems, however, can be minimized by gathering pertinent and relevant data regarding socio-political trends and events within the community, school district financial resources, technological requirements, interstate and regional influences upon educational policy. The basis for these suggestions has been the understanding of the importance of having a continuing awareness of what is happening in the environment (King, 1977). These suggestions have focused on the procedures that should be followed to classify the environmental influences. The procedures include determining the immediacy of the impact of the environmental influences (Terry, 1977), and ascertaining the specific approaches administrators should follow to evaluate the environment (Neubauer, 1977).

The purpose of each of the recommendations is to attain a better understanding of the environment; although the specific procedures and processes for each suggestion differ from one another in varying degrees. The variety of recommendations suggests that each school system and each level within the system may have its own specific strategic planning requirements. It is important that each school system and level adopt that process and those procedures that best suit its needs; This action will help to ensure that the appropriate awareness of the events and trends in the socio-political, financial, technological, interstate and regional environment is maintained.

Resource Analysis

The resources analysis involves an assessment of the internal environment of the school system. The skills, capabilities, quality and quantity of the financial, physical, organizational and technological resources are determined and evaluated in this step of the formulation process. This internal environment data complements the external environment data gathered in the previous step.

It must be kept in mind that the purpose of this important activity (gathering internal data) is to determine what resources are available for strategy implementation. In meeting this end, resource analysis becomes the first step in satisfying the need for an accurate assessment of the capabilities needed for determination of the system's long-range objectives and goals.

Divergence Analysis

Divergence analysis brings together the data gathered in the four preceding steps. The anticipated end results of the present strategy, the objectives that are sought and the awareness of the extent and limitations of the internal resources are brought together and analyzed. This analysis determines the difference between where the present strategy is heading and what the end results, the objectives, resources, and environmental analysis suggest should be attained. The difference is the divergence between the end results of the two directions – the present and the most appropriate.

This difference indicates where changes must be undertaken to modify the present strategy. Even if no difference exists, which is unlikely, this step ensures an effort to make certain that the most appropriate strategy end results are being pursued.

Strategy Alternatives Determination

The primary concern with the strategy formulation process to this point has been to determine where it is best to go, i.e., what end results should be sought. Having determined them and their relationship to the current strategy, the process now focuses on how to attain these end results.

Given that change in the current strategy must take place or that a specific strategy must be solidified, actions must be taken to ensure that the right direction to reach the desired end results is determined. This step of the formulation process involves determining what strategies could be used to ensure that the desired end results are reached. Focusing the consideration of several strategies enhances the probability of settling on the best.

Strategy Choice

The strategic alternatives are then evaluated. The alternative that best meets the needs of attaining the desired end results within the resource availability is selected for implementation.

It is important to recognize that the value orientation of the individuals involved in the evaluation process has strong influence on the final strategy selection. In fact, their value orientation has an effect on the entire formulation process.

Contingency Plans Determination

The strategy selected to be implemented is chosen on the basis of current information and knowledge concerning the future. Obviously, even with the most reliable data there is uncertainty concerning the future. The uncertainty suggests the prudence of being prepared for any, and hopeall, developments that might possibly occur and adversely affect the strategies being implemented. This prudence gives rise to the need for contingency strategies.

Contingency plans define the specific actions to be taken when those unexpected developments not planned for in the formulation process occur (Steiner, 1979). It should be understood that contingency plans cannot be made for all eventualities. Consequently, these plans should be considered for the critical events which appear to have a high probability of occuring or, if they took place, could have a catastrophic effect on the implemented strategy.

Developing plans for potentially critical events before they occur ensures that the school system is prepared to respond rationally and decisively if catastrophe strikes. Hopefully, the contingency plans will be placed in a computer file, rather than in a file cabinet, where they will remain after being developed.

Implementation and Control

The final step in the strategy formulation process is the implementation of the strategy selected in the strategy choice step. This step involves activities that relate the strategy to the operating plans (French, 1979). The primary concerns of the translation of the strategic plan to operational plans is twofold:

1. Determining the appropriateness of the structure of the school system to the implementation of the strategy; and

2. Translating the strategic plan to the operational mode in a manner that ensures that the operating plans are meaningfully related to the strategy.

Structure is the design of the school system through which its activities are administered. This relationship is significant because the strategy affects the structure by determining how tasks are assigned; how performance is motivated, rewarded, and controlled; and how the school system adapts to a changing environment.

The board's responsibility for the future direction of the school system leads to the conclusion that it is a normal and expected activity of the board of education to be involved in planning system-wide objectives and goals over and above simply determining the general direction of the system. This is an essential activity involving board members. The significance of this board activity cannot be overstated for it ensures that someone within the school structure is involved in determining what the short-range direction is and what the long-range direction should be.

The determination of the means to attain the objectives and goals is a recognized duty of the board and two specific board activities that are associated with the strategic planning formulation process are environmental analysis and financial resource allocation. The failure of the board to maintain an awareness of the vicissitudes of the environment and sound financial acumen can be contributing factors to the failure of the system attaining desired results.

The suggested roles for board members in the strategic planning process range from initiating the system-wide activities to reviewing administrative data associated with the activities.

Initiator

In assuming the role of an initiator the board of education is setting direction for the system's administrators. The most important and far reaching of these initiator activities is that of establishing long-range system-wide objectives and goals (Hildreth, 1978).

Once the objectives and goals have been established, the means of achieving them must be determined. The development of strategies that will accomplish the objectives is considered, by some, to be in the bailiwick of the board of education. The board, acting in the initiator role then extends the strategies to the determination of policy, the framework within which school administrators must work. The definition of policy also includes determining the availability of the resources that are needed for implementation of strategies. This involvement results from the board's control of the overall allocation of resources.

Reviewer

The top down approach of the initiator role of the board is not necessarily considered to be in the best interests of the school system. It is, at times, felt that board members do not possess the

time or the expertise to determine the appropriate actions for the system. Consequently, the board should act as a reviewer of administrative recommendations. In this role, administrators propose and the board disposes. Reviewing by the board of the premises of the plans or the plans themselves is thought to ensure that the system is doing the right thing (Weber, 1979).

Participator

Active involvement of both the board and school administration in planning activities would seem to lead to the greatest benefits and returns for the school system. This participator approach would permit a far greater use of the expertise and knowledge board members bring to their board responsibilities. In addition, the professional experiences school administrators have developed is made available to the board.

Although the participator role may seem to be similar to the reviewer role, there is a distinct difference. Both roles involve review, but in the participatory role the board works closely with the school administration in ensuring that the best and most meaningful results are attained. Although the board may be considered to be responsible for determining the system's objectives and goals, it looks to the superintendent and support staff for recommendations and guidance.

Legally, there is no question that board members must be involved in the planning process of the school system. Administration of the school system is carried out directly or under the direction of the board of education. As the public's trustees, the board is both accountable and legally responsible for all results and actions of the system. Therefore, given these statutory and judiciary responsibilities, the individual board member must be very much concerned about the future of the school system. To keep a finger on the pulse of the system's future the board member must be aware of what strategic plans are being developed and implemented within the school system.

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